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UNCLAS AMMAN 006937

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: AQABA PIZZA HUT FIRE AN ACCIDENT

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY

1. (SBU) Econoff spoke to Arab Food Catering Company owner Khaled Dhaleh November 27 to check on press reports about a "suspicious" fire in a Pizza Hut in Aqaba. Dhaleh, whose company owns the Pizza Hut, Burger King, and Popeyes restaurants in Jordan, said the November 25th fire was caused by a short circuit in a refrigerator. (A number of press reports claimed the cause of the fire was arson rooted in anti-Americanism, and portrayed the incident as one of a series of attacks on American fast food restaurants throughout the region.)

2. (SBU) Dhaleh told us the fire began at about noon, when a short circuit in a basement refrigerator ignited a fire with packaged material within. The fire smoldered slowly, damaging the refrigerator and part of the building, but was quickly brought under control and caused no injuries. He said that damages were in the range of about \$15,000, and that the restaurant would be reopened December 2.

3. (SBU) Dhaleh said he heard initial news reports on the radio at midnight the same day that reported arson as the cause. He said that it seemed to be a case of "wishful thinking" on the part of the press, "some of whom wanted a story and some of whom wanted to celebrate". Dhaleh added that he had experienced no recent bouts of anti-Americanism in any of his restaurants, and that business was "okay".

4. (SBU) This report corroborates the Ambassador's conversation with the son of the owner of the hotel in which the Pizza Hut is located. The son, a friend, also said it was an electrical fire.

GNEHM